

**DRAFT**  
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**HUNTING PLAN**  
**LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**  
**October, 2001**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was established under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 for “...use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” (16 U.S.C. 715-715d, 715e, 715f-715r). Mitigation tracts obtained from the Montana Power Company were accepted under the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, “for the conservation and enhancement of fish and wildlife” (16 U.S.C. 661(1)-662(c)).

The Refuge is located in the west-central portion of Flathead County approximately 25 air miles west of Kalispell, Montana. The Refuge is located in a geographic drainage known locally as Pleasant Valley. Refuge topography can best be described as a long valley in which Pleasant Valley Creek flows south from the mountains, turns west and eventually flows into the Fisher River. Meadow Creek, flowing out of Dahl Lake joins up with Pleasant Valley Creek near the middle of the valley. Dahl Lake lies near the eastern boundary of the Refuge and is a partially drained shallow lacustrine wetland whose water levels fluctuate seasonally. Refuge elevations range from 3,488 feet above mean sea level to 4,600 feet.

The Refuge was established in August of 1999 with the transfer and purchase of lands from the Montana Power Company. The acquisition boundary encompasses 9,325 acres. Present Refuge acquisition totals 7,885 acres. Lands not acquired, but within the acquisition boundary, include lands owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company and the Montana Department of State Lands.

A Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) is currently being developed for the Refuge and is scheduled for completion during 2002. This hunt plan is being coordinated with the development of the CCP.

Refuge staff currently consists of one Refuge Operations Specialist with additional responsibilities for Swan River NWR and the Flathead County portion of the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District. All of these units are satellite Refuge units within the National Bison Range Complex headquartered at Moiese, Montana.

This plan is to ensure that public hunting is conducted in a manner that is compatible and consistent with other public use opportunities and purposes for which the Refuge was established.

## **II. CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITIES**

The Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (EA) identified the primary purposes for which the Refuge was established. These purposes are: 1) to fulfill the settlement in the Federal Energy Relicensing Commission (FERC) order between the Department of the Interior, Montana Power Company, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai

Tribes; 2) to protect and maintain wetland habitat for migratory birds, waterfowl and other species of animals and plants; 3) to restore floodplain acreage to its historic role; and 4) to enhance the survival prospects of endangered and threatened species in the area.

This plan supports the priority public use provisions of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Hunting as specified in this plan is a wildlife dependent recreational use and the law states that as such, it “shall receive priority consideration in national wildlife refuge planning and management.”

The hunting program is designed to minimize potential conflicts with Refuge purposes. Hunting of elk and deer is permitted except within the designated closed area (Figure 1). Ruffed grouse, blue grouse, spruce grouse (collectively called mountain grouse) and turkey are permitted Refuge-wide and will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the purposes of the Refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (603 FWS).

Migratory bird hunting is not included pending wetland habitat restoration and population monitoring. Closure to migratory bird hunting will prevent conflict with Refuge migratory bird purposes in addition to potential conflict with endangered species needs and other non-hunting public uses. Much of the Refuge bottom lands will not be open for big game hunting which will provide for visitor safety, and prevent conflicts with endangered species needs and other public uses. If at some point in the future, migratory bird hunting is deemed compatible and will not interfere or detract from fulfillment of the purposes of the Refuge, an amendment to this plan can be considered.

Hunting of other species including moose, bear, lion, furbearers, coyotes and ground squirrels is not permitted. This action is also intended to prevent any material conflict with Refuge purposes, provide adequate safety, benefit endangered species and improve wildlife observation opportunities.

Initial funding to provide parking areas, modify fences for access and appropriate signs will cost an estimated \$10,000, if contracted. NBR Complex staff may be utilized if practical and would reduce this cost by approximately 50 percent. Initial funding for brochure development and law enforcement presence is estimated at \$5,000. Some of the law enforcement presence needs will be provided in collaboration with Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP). Additional law enforcement needs and monitoring will be provided by Complex staff stationed at the National Bison Range. No supplemental funding has been allocated to implement this plan. Eventually, resources will be allocated by the FWS specific to Lost Trail NWR to provide the recurring needs to conduct the hunt program. In the event the Complex staff are not available or MFWP is not available, the hunt program will be suspended per FWS compatibility regulations.

Being a new Refuge, an estimation of hunter visits is very speculative. Based on the Project Leader’s experience with similar refuge hunting programs at other refuges, a rough estimate of annual hunter visits is 2,000 hunter-use days, including pre-hunt scouting.

### **III. STATEMENT OF GOALS**

Specific Refuge goals and objectives will be identified in the Refuge CCP. Current draft goals are summarized as follows:

- Stream Habitats Goal: Restore, enhance, and maintain riparian habitats to benefit indigenous wildlife species and the ecological integrity of the Fisher River watershed.
- Wetland Habitats Goal: Provide breeding, resting and feeding habitat for wetland-dependent species by restoring, maintaining and enhancing a mosaic of lake, semi-permanent, seasonal, temporary, and saturated wetlands.
- Grassland Habitats Goal: Restore, enhance and maintain upland grasslands, with an emphasis on native bunch grass prairie, to provide habitat for migratory birds, species of concern and associated wildlife species.
- Forested Habitats Goal: Enhance and maintain forested habitats within the context of the Fisher River watershed for migratory birds, species of concern, and other associated wildlife species.
- Migratory Birds Goal: Preserve, restore and enhance the ecological diversity and abundance of migratory birds of the intermountain west Douglas Fir/ponderosa pine forest, wetland complexes, riparian habitat, and bunchgrass prairie.
- Other Wildlife Goal: Restore and maintain resident and endemic wildlife populations to enhance Lost Trail NWR and the Pleasant Valley ecosystem.
- Species of Concern Goal: Contribute to the conservation, enhancement and recovery of endangered, threatened and special concern species in the Lost Trail Refuge and Pleasant Valley ecosystem.
- Public Use Goal: Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities for persons of all abilities to learn about and enjoy the inter-montane ecosystem of northwest Montana, its associated fish, wildlife and plants of Lost Trail NWR and the Refuge System in a safe and compatible manner.
- Archaeological, Cultural and Historical Resources Goal: Protect, manage, and interpret archaeological, cultural, and historical resources present at Lost Trail NWR for the benefit of present and future generations.
- Refuge Administration Goal: Provide staffing, funding, and facilities to maintain the long-term integrity of habitats and wildlife resources of Lost Trail NWR in supporting the achievement of ecosystem and Refuge System goals.

•Partnerships Goal: Promote and develop partnerships with adjacent landowners, public and private organizations, and other interested individuals to preserve, restore, and enhance a diverse and intact ecosystem of which Lost Trail NWR is an integral part.

It is not anticipated that these goals will be significantly impacted by the implementation of a hunt program. In fact, the hunting of some species will aid in the MFWP's ability to manage species and obtain harvest objectives. The effect of hunting on these goals will be discussed in the following sections.

#### **IV. ASSESSMENT**

Significant additional information and analysis of wildlife data is available in the EA from which this document is formulated. For a copy, contact the National Bison Range at 406-644-2211, ext 0.

Elk populations within MFWP hunting district 103 are consistently above MFWP objective levels. Parameters used by MFWP for setting objective levels include population estimates, bull per cow ratio and calf per cow ratio. Refuge lands are primarily elk winter range. Removal of some elk within the Refuge will facilitate adequate harvest levels and assist MFWP in optimum management of the local elk population. Hunter activities will prevent elk from seeking sanctuary within the Refuge. If elk were allowed unlimited sanctuary within the Refuge it could reduce harvest on adjacent lands, result in an overabundance of elk on and off Refuge and inhibit restoration of riparian woody vegetation.

White-tailed deer are year-round residents of the Refuge. Mule deer primarily use the refuge during fall and winter. Regional population fluctuations of both species are closely correlated to climatic fluctuations. The white-tailed deer and mule deer populations have been steadily increasing for the past four years. MFWP monitors both species to facilitate adaptive management utilizing harvest regulations. Both the gray wolf and mountain lion are present in the Refuge vicinity and are subject to these prey population fluctuations. Hunter activities will prevent deer from seeking sanctuary within the Refuge. If deer were allowed unlimited sanctuary within the Refuge, it could reduce harvest on adjacent lands, result in periodic overabundance of deer on and off Refuge, and inhibit restoration of riparian woody vegetation.

Moose hunting is not permitted on the Refuge. Moose hunting permits in the hunting district have declined from 25 during most of the 1990's to 15 in 2001. High hunter success rates (80 - 100%) in the district indicate refuge lands are not necessary for a quality hunt. Hunting of moose on the Refuge would lessen public viewing opportunities for an already small population.

Black bear and mountain lion hunting are not permitted on the Refuge. Spring bear hunting could interfere with Refuge migratory bird objectives since both would be in dense bottomland habitats. Regional bear and lion populations are sufficient to sustain hunting within the Refuge. However, both species range widely and hunting within the Refuge is not needed to sustain

harvest objectives set by MFWP. Non-hunting of these species will also foster viewing opportunities on the Refuge.

Hunting of waterfowl and other migratory birds is not permitted. Wetland habitat does not presently support significant numbers of birds during the hunting season and freeze-up occurs earlier than in most areas. Most Refuge wetlands have been drained or partially drained. Habitat restoration is ongoing but not expected to be completed in the immediate future. Migratory bird response cannot be determined until a significant level of restoration has occurred. An evaluation of migratory bird hunting must also include possible conflicts with other threatened and endangered species, public safety, hunt quality and other public uses.

Upland game bird hunting including blue grouse, spruce grouse and ruffed grouse is permitted Refuge-wide. Annual natural mortality rates are generally quite high but are offset by a high reproductive potential. Hunting generally has no appreciable impact on healthy small game populations as the harvest is insignificant compared to natural mortality. MFWP Region 1, of 7 MFWP Regions, yields 50 percent of the statewide harvest of these species indicating a consistently high population in the area of the Refuge and the ability to tolerate hunting pressure. Spring and fall turkey hunting is permitted Refuge-wide. Turkeys are not indigenous to Montana and are not a priority species for Refuge management consideration. They were released in the area by the MFWP to increase hunting opportunities. The fall turkey season runs from September 1 to December 15. Currently, Flathead County has a permit-only season with a total of 300 either-sex permits issued for the fall of 2001. Spring turkey season runs from the first week in April to the first week in May. A total of 200 permits were issued in 2001 by MFWP for spring turkey hunting in Flathead County. Spring turkey hunting may cause minimal disturbance to nesting migratory birds, however, spring green-up is late in Pleasant Valley and many species will not have initiated nesting before the end of the spring turkey season.

Furbearer, coyote and other species are not open to hunting on the Refuge. These species, though not open to hunting or shooting on the Refuge, do have viable populations in the Region. Hunting of these species is not open for reasons other than their population sustainability. These reasons include conflict with other public use activities, public safety and FWS quality hunting guidelines.

According to refuge policy, (RM 5.436) yearly evaluation and monitoring for impacts from the hunt program will be conducted to determine if modifications to the hunt plan are necessary. Criteria for evaluating the hunting program will include; compatibility with refuge purposes, biological soundness, funding and economics, relationship with other refuge programs, and recreational opportunity. Major revisions to the hunt plan will be in the form of amendments to the plan. Preparation and approval of amendments to the refuge hunting plan will be handled identically to the preparation and approval of the plan itself. This includes; coordination with the State, endangered species consultation, and public involvement and review. Only the revised portions of the plan will be submitted for approval. Revisions can be approved by the regional

director only if the refuge is listed in 50 CFR as being open to that particular category of hunting. Otherwise, the amended hunting plan must be submitted for rulemaking.

## **V. DESCRIPTION OF HUNTING PROGRAM**

Elk and deer hunting are permitted following MFWP regulations (gun and archery) within designated areas of the Refuge (Figure 1). No elk or deer hunting is allowed between Pleasant Valley (county) Road and South Pleasant Valley Road. Hunting of elk and deer is permitted on all Refuge lands south and east of the South Pleasant Valley Road (i.e. southeast pond area) and north of Pleasant Valley (county) Road.

Shotgun-only hunting, using federally approved non-toxic shot, is permitted for ruffed, blue and spruce grouse (collectively called mountain grouse) and both spring and fall turkey hunting. Mountain grouse and turkey hunting is allowed Refuge-wide, all other MFWP regulations and seasons will apply. Possession of toxic shotshells while hunting on the Refuge is prohibited.

Hunting of moose, mountain lion, black bear, coyote, ground squirrels, furbearers and waterfowl is not permitted on the Refuge.

Vehicle access is permitted on all roads currently open to the public including the North 1019 Road and Pleasant Valley (county) Road. Hunters would be required to park in designated parking areas (locations to be determined) to access areas open to hunting.

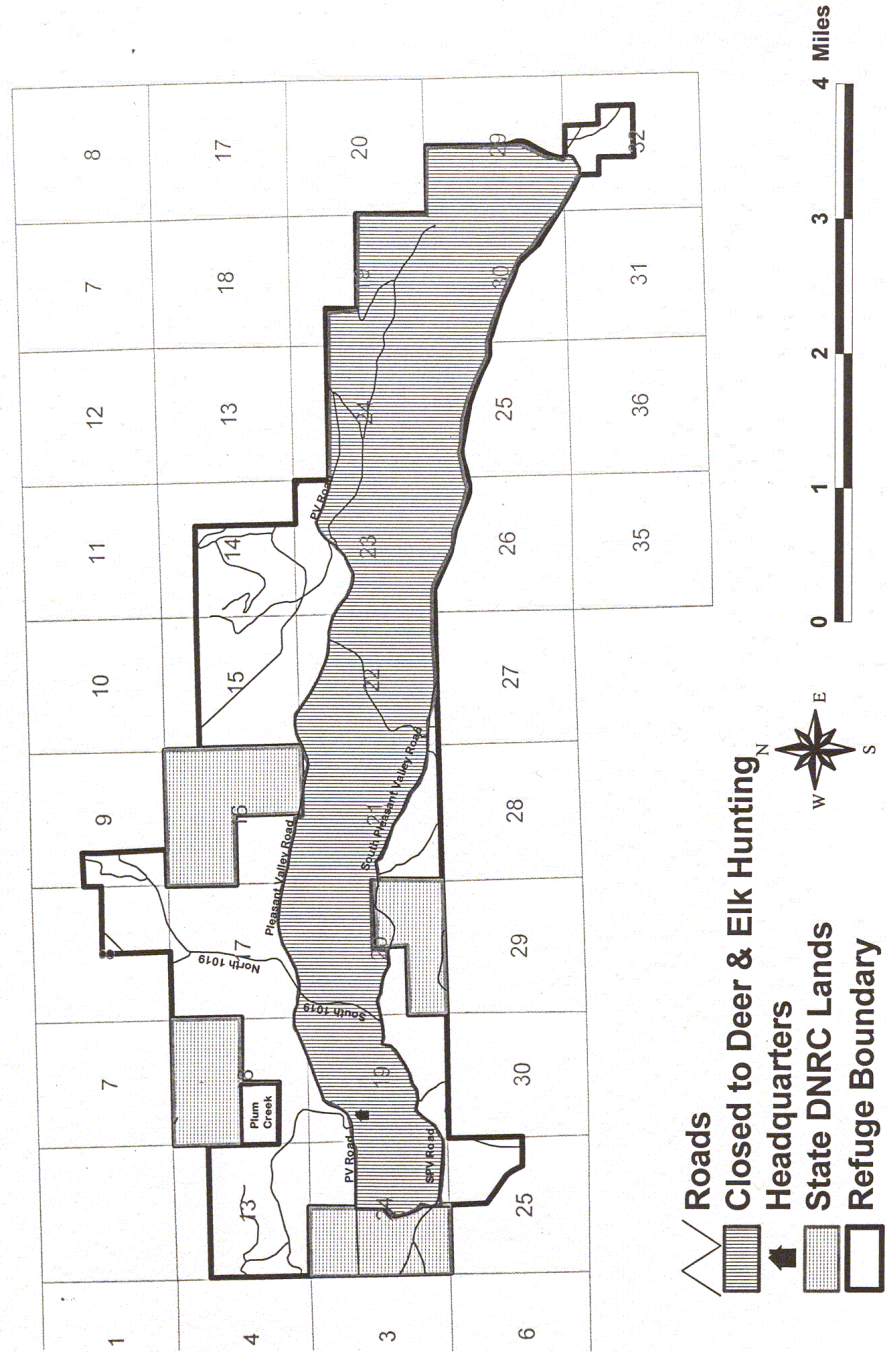
Special Youth hunting and access for hunters with disabilities is encouraged and will be accommodated following MFWP regulations. In addition, the first week of archery and the first week of general elk and deer hunting seasons are open to youth-only hunting. Consult the Refuge Manager for accessible hunting opportunities and special permit requirements.

All or any part of the Refuge may be closed to hunting by the Refuge Manager whenever necessary to protect the resources of the area or in the event of an emergency endangering life or property.

Private and DNRC inholdings within the Refuge acquisition boundary are not subject to the provisions of this hunting plan.



# Figure 1. Lost Trail NWR Hunt Areas



Hunting program monitoring will consist of law enforcement patrols to provide information and insure compliance with MFWP and Refuge regulations. Check stations will be set up periodically within the Refuge to monitor compliance and collect public use and biological information.

MFWP law enforcement staff, as well as Refuge Officers detailed from the National Bison Range, will actively enforce hunting regulations on the Refuge. No law enforcement staff are presently assigned to Lost Trail NWR. A minimum of two staff, one MFWP and one FWS, are necessary to conduct the program. Funding requirements needed for staff, equipment and travel are approximately \$5,000 per year. Until law enforcement staff are allocated to Lost Trail NWR, the FWS portion of these costs will be borne by the Bison Range Recreation Fee Demonstration Program fund.

## **VI. MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

### **A. Biological Conflicts**

Most significant potential for biological conflict is alleviated by restricting hunting activities to elk, deer, turkey and mountain grouse.

No conflict is anticipated with threatened or endangered species which may utilize the Refuge including bald eagle, gray wolf, grizzly bear or lynx. All of these species range widely and are not limited to the Refuge during hunting seasons. Measures taken to avoid potential conflicts include limiting the groups of species hunted to elk, deer, turkey and mountain grouse and designating additional closed areas which can provide sanctuary should a listed species come within the refuge during a hunting season (e.g., buffer zone around bald eagle nest from spring turkey hunters). Anticipated harvest of prey species within the Refuge is not expected to be at a level to adversely affect the prey base of any endangered species. Should it become apparent that hunting activities are or will adversely affect a threatened or endangered species, the hunt will be modified or discontinued by the Refuge Manager as provided in the Code of Federal Regulations Title 50.

Disturbance of waterfowl and other wetland dependent migratory birds is minimized by designating primarily upland areas for big game hunting. Disturbance by grouse and turkey hunters is minimized because these species will generally not be in the same habitats as wetland-dependent wildlife during hunting seasons.

The closed area provides an area for bald eagle, wolf, grizzly bear, lynx, and migratory birds that is undisturbed by big game hunters.

Non-toxic shot is required for mountain grouse and turkey hunting to reduce the presence of lead in the environment.

Motorized access and parking is limited to specified roads and parking areas to lessen disturbance to wildlife and their habitat.

## **B. Public Use Conflicts**

Hunting for turkey is allowed throughout the Refuge during a spring and fall season, with upland game bird hunting allowed throughout the Refuge in the fall. The hunting program has the potential to conflict with other forms of wildlife-dependent recreation. These include wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Hunting is a use that occurs during a limited time while the other uses can occur year-round, providing for a separation in time. Also, some areas of the Refuge will be closed to big game hunting during the fall.

The Refuge will provide adequate and appropriate signs and handouts for users. This will allow for informed decisions about types and timing of recreational uses.

## **C. Administrative Conflicts**

Administrative conflicts are not anticipated. The Refuge is currently closed to all hunting. Additional law enforcement resources will be necessary to administer the hunting program. The resources are not currently available at the Refuge. However, MFWP law enforcement officers presently assist the Refuge and this assistance is anticipated to continue. FWS Refuge Officers from the NBR Complex headquarters will patrol the Refuge until Refuge law enforcement staff positions are created at Lost Trail. Funding to accomplish these temporary duty assignments will be from the Bison Range Recreation Fee Demonstration Program for the interim.

Resources to develop a hunting program/public use brochure and additional informational and regulatory signage will be necessary. Should Refuge Operating Needs System funding not be available, these needs will also be allocated from the Bison Range fee fund.

Areas around Refuge headquarters, maintenance buildings and quarters are closed to hunting as posted.

## **VII. CONDUCT OF THE HUNT**

### **a. Refuge - Specific Hunting Regulations**

The hunting program will generally follow the MFWP seasons and other regulations for elk, deer and mountain grouse. Hunting of elk, white-tailed deer and mule deer is permitted on open upland areas of the Refuge, and turkey and mountain grouse hunting are permitted Refuge-wide subject, to the following conditions:

- Areas around the Refuge headquarters, maintenance buildings and quarters are posted as “Closed to Hunting” areas.
- Hunting for elk, white-tailed deer and mule deer is allowed in open upland areas and not allowed in the closed bottomlands area.
- Possession of shotshells containing lead or other toxic shot is prohibited.
- Overnight camping is prohibited.
- Open fires are prohibited.
- Retrieval of game through areas closed to hunting is prohibited.
- Only portable or temporary blinds and tree stands are permitted.
- Parking is permitted in designated areas only.
- The first week of the archery and the first week of general elk and deer hunting season is open to youth only hunting.
- Turkey and grouse hunting-shotguns only.

#### B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt

The majority of recreational uses within the nearby area are oriented toward outdoor opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping and horseback riding, etc.. Prior to Refuge acquisition, the lands covered in this plan were hunted only by guests of the previous owner and manager for all legal game species.

During the acquisition evaluation process and subsequent planning processes, the majority of the commenting public and cooperating agencies, MFWP and DNRC, have steadfastly recommended hunting as their preferred alternative. Since the acquisition decision document EA stated that a hunt plan would be developed, these publics are impatient for the FWS to finalize this document. However, others suggested the Refuge not be open to any hunting and that motorized vehicle access off the county road should not be permitted, or at least minimized.

Anticipated reaction of the public to this hunting plan is expected to be quite varied as indicated by the comments received over the past four years. Most will likely be satisfied with a quality hunt opportunity provided by the addition of some new public lands being opened. Some are expected to feel the hunting constituents have been slighted by the Refuge not being open to hunting similar to Waterfowl Production Areas. A few constituents will regard the Refuge as being influenced too much by the hunting community since wildlife refuges should, in their opinion, be wildlife sanctuaries.

#### C. Hunter Application and Registration Procedures

No application process will be utilized for implementation of this plan. Hunters may be required to register during access to the refuge to provide statistical information on public use and adequacy of accessibility of the Refuge.

#### D. Description of Hunter Selection Process

Hunting will be open to all hunters who meet MFWP licensing requirement for the species being hunted.

#### E. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunt

The Refuge hunting program will be announced region wide with the aid of news releases to area newspapers, radio stations and television stations.

#### F. Description of Hunter Orientation, Including Pre-Hunt Scouting

Hunter orientation will consist of a refuge leaflet containing a map and list of refuge-specific regulations. Refuge staff will be available to provide information requested by the public.

No provision for pre-hunt scouting is currently necessary. All areas open to hunting are also open to wildlife observation such that pre-hunt scouting is permitted.

#### G. Hunter Requirements

1. Federally approved non-toxic shot only for hunting of turkey and mountain grouse.
2. Overnight camping is prohibited.
3. Retrieval of game through areas closed to hunting is prohibited.
4. Only portable or temporary blinds and tree stands are permitted.
5. Parking is permitted in designated areas only.
6. Dogs may be used for the hunting of mountain grouse.
7. Use of riding stock is only permitted on access routes designated through the Refuge to access off Refuge lands as designated in the public use leaflet.
8. Use of pack stock to remove downed big game is permitted.
9. All other state regulations will apply.